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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies have shown a correlation between life events and physical health, mental health, and behavioral measures such as impaired grade point average. Most of these studies have measured stressfulness by summing the total number of events experienced in a given time period. However, Vinokur and Selzer have shown that the amount of undesirable change correlated better than total change with psychopathology and with a behavioral measure, number of traffic accidents. In this study, 253 college students rated the life events they experienced in the past year as mostly desirable or undesirable. Undesirable life events had a higher correlation with lowered grade point average than total life events. Desirable life events did not correlate with grade point average. Practically all of the correlation between total life events and grade point average came from the undesirable life events. Furthermore, undesirable life events correlated with lowered grade point average when academic ability and past academic performance were partialled out. This was not consistently true of total life events. The results support Vinokur and Selzer's claim that stressfulness can best be conceptualized in terms of its undesirability. (Author)

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(1) Title

The relationship of life events to academic performance in college students

(2) Problem

BY SAMUEL KNAPP

Adolf Meyer was a pioneer in exploring the relationship between personal life crises and health (Lief, 1948). Meyer claimed that life changes such as change of habitat, jobs, as well as births and deaths have a relationship to health. The recent development of life event checklists provide a standard procedure to measure life changes.

Holmes and Rahe (1967) developed the first widely used life event checklist to quantify life changes experienced by an individual within a given time period. Holmes and Rahe selected 43 items from their clinical experience for the checklist. Others have developed similar checklists including Anderson's (Note 1) checklist for college students. Anderson revised the Holmes and Rahe scale after polling 103 college students concerning events occurring in their lives.

Life event checklists have allowed investigators to research Meyer's belief concerning the relationship between health and life events. Holmes and Rahe (1974) summarized research showing life events are correlated with various episodes of physical illness. Marx, Garrity and Bowers (1975) also found a correlation of physical illness and life events using the Anderson scale. Life events also correlate positively with mental illness as assessed by interviews using

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the Langner Scale, or its modification, the Gurin Index (Dohrenwend, 1973a, Dohrenwend, 1973b, Markush & Favero, 1974; Myers, Lindenthal & Pepper, 1971, 1972, 1974).

Few life event studies have used performance measures. Vinokur and Selzer (1975) found a positive relationship between undesirable life events and the number of traffic violations. They claimed that "stressful life events should be conceptualized and measured in terms of undesirability." Their concept of life events differs from Holmes and Masuda (1974) who claim the critical factor of life events is the total readjustment or change required by the event. In another study of performance, Harris (Note 2) found grade point average (GPA) of college students, regardless of their ability, decreased as the number of life events increased.

The present study shows the relationship between GPA of college students and life events categorized according to their desirability. This study used a modified Anderson scale which included self ratings of events as desirable or undesirable. It was hypothesized that GPA would decrease as the number of undesirable life events increased. The possible effects of academic ability were controlled by partialling out Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores, high school class percentile and predicted GPA. Predicted GPA for freshmen was based on an admissions department formula that combines SAT scores and high school class percentile. Predicted GPA for upperclassmen was based on previous college grades for the

second semester of the 1974-1975 school year.

(3) Subjects

Three hundred and twenty five students enrolled in five required English and four required Health classes at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania were selected as a sample of convenience. Two hundred and sixty nine of the students signed releases which allowed the experimenter to use their academic records in the study. Of those who had signed releases, 16 were discarded because the students were part-time (registered for less than 12 hours), had written their names illegibly, or had given names which could not be located in the registrar's office. Of the 253 students who were subjects, 90 were freshmen, 94 sophomores, 53 juniors and 16 were seniors.

(4) Procedures

The students completed the College Schedule of Recent Experiences (Anderson, Note 1). Students were asked to indicate how many times they had experienced each of the events on the checklist during the last year and to rate the events as mostly desirable or undesirable for them personally. The students were asked their age, sex, class in school and to sign a release form to allow the researcher access to their academic records. The questionnaires were administered during class periods in the last week of the second semester of the 1975-1976 school year.

Prior academic performance and academic ability

measures were obtained from students who signed releases. Specific information included if available, SAT scores, high school class percentile, 1974-1975 second semester GPA for upperclassmen and predicted GPA for freshmen. The GPA for the second semester of the 1975-1976 school year was obtained for all students.

(5) Results

The procedure used by Marx, Garrity and Bowers (1975) was followed in scoring the completed questionnaires. No event was counted more than four times regardless of how many times the student recorded it. The average number of total events was 19.4 per student. There were 12.2 desirable events and 6.9 undesirable events per student. The sum of desirable and undesirable events do not equal the sum of the total life events because life events which the student did not rate as to desirability are included in the sum of total life events, but not in either of the desirability totals.

GPA correlated negatively at a significant level with undesirable life events, r (253) = -.301, $p < .01$ and with total life events, r (253) = -.195, $p < .05$. The same pattern of correlations were obtained when ability and past academic performance were controlled through partial correlation techniques.

Insert Table 1 here

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(6) Implications

The results confirm the hypothesis that an increase in undesirable life events are correlated with a decrease in academic performance as measured by GPA. Undesirable life events were negatively correlated with GPA even when academic predictors such as predicted GPA, previous GPA, SAT scores and high school class rank percentile were partialled out. Undesirable life events always had a higher correlation with GPA than total life events. Additional analyses using weighted life events based on weights developed by Anderson (Note 1) showed no changes in the significant correlations.

The relationship of total life events and GPA are identical to the results of Harris (Note 2). However, this study goes beyond the results of Harris by showing that undesirability is a better predictor of GPA than total life change. This finding supports Vinokur and Selzer's claim that life events may best be conceptualized in terms of their undesirability.

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Table 1

Correlations of Life Events with GPA

of College Students

Life Events	GPA N=253	GPA with high school percentile partialed out N=239	GPA with SAT scores partialed out N=219	GPA with predicted or previous GPA partialed out N=227
Total	-.195*	-.192*	-.111	-.124
Desirable	-.044	-.069	.038	.008
Undesirable	-.301**	-.273**	-.252**	-.247**

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$